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Boys basketball: Scouting the Upstate Eight Conference

Nov. 21, 2022

By Craig Brueska



Bartlett's Kelton McEwen averaged 13 points and 4 assists last year for the **Hawks**, who went 25-7. *John Starks | Staff Photographer*

Bartlett

Coach: Jim Wolfsmith (15th year).

Elgin

Coach: Brett Johnson (1st year).

Last season's record: 4-23, 1-17.

Top returning players: Maddox Hollian, jr. (G, 6-0); Nate Aquinio, sr. (G, 5-9); Angel Nunez, jr. (G/F, 6-1); Ismael Martinez, sr. (G, 5-9); Micah Giovenco, sr. (F, 6-2).

Top new players: Kristian Davis, sr. (F, 6-0); Terrell Arrington, jr. (G, 5-9); Jayden Yarber, sr. (F, 6-1).

Worth noting: Brett Johnson takes over at the helm for the **Maroons** after guiding **South Elgin** to a 99-74 record over the past 7 seasons. "We're excited to start a new chapter at **Elgin**," said Johnson, whose team returns Hollian, who averaged 10.1 points, 4.7 rebounds, 2.2 assists, and 1.5 steals per game last season. Aquinio, Nunez and Giovenco combined to score 14 points per contest a year ago. "Effort and intensity have picked up in practice and the players are excited to move forward," said Johnson. "The returnees/seniors are leading by example and believe in themselves. Expectations are that they will vastly improve from last year and we will compete in every game." **Elgin** opens its season Tuesday against Genoa-Kingston at the Westminster Christian Thanksgiving Tournament. The Maroons begin conference play at Fenton on Dec. 1. "We think the conference is going to be really tough this year," said Johnson. "There are a few top tier teams that will compete for the conference title but the other 6 or 7 (teams) will battle it out each and every night."

Fenton

Coach: Chaz Taft (7th year).

Last season's record: 11-20, 7-10.

Top returning players: Nick Tinajero, sr. (G, 6-2); Caleb Lewis, sr. (G, 5-9); Alejandro Diaz, jr. (G, 6-2); Xavier Gonzalez, jr. (G, 5-8).

Top new players: Brandon Block, jr. (G, 6-1); Damian Harnish, jr. (G, 6-3); Angel Olea, jr. (G, 6-0); Miguel Sanchez, jr. (G, 5-8).

Worth noting: Gonzalez, who averaged 16.5 points per game as a sophomore last year, will not be available this season due to an ACL injury. "We will play without our leading scorer from a year ago (Gonzalez), but I really love this group's approach to the season," said Fenton coach Chaz Taft. "They are all about the next man up mentality and will try to make up those points by a committee instead of it resting on the shoulders of one person." The Bison begin their season Monday against Clemente at the 34th annual Chuck Mitchell Tournament in Bensenville. "This team comes to practice every day with a great attitude and work ethic, so the sky is the limit for this group."

Glenbard East

Coach: Eric Kelly (1st year).

Last season's record: 7-24, 7-11.

Top returning players: Ari Pierson, jr. (G, 6-2); Jack Ryan, sr. (G, 6-1); Trevor Rehnstrom, jr. (G, 6-3); Aleks Jajic, jr. (F, 6-5).

Top new players: Quami Stanton, jr. (G, 5-11); Dailen Zollicoffer, jr. (G, 5-10); Gavin Bellezza, jr. (G/F, 5-11).

Worth noting: The Rams have a new head coach in Eric Kelly, who previously served as a varsity assistant for the past 9 seasons at Waubonsie Valley, Bolingbrook, Stagg, and Providence-St. Mel. "We are building a new culture with a new coaching staff," said Kelly. "We will be small and play fast." The Rams begin their season Monday against Glenbard North in

the annual District 87 Thanksgiving Tournament. A 7th-place conference finisher from a year ago, the Rams open their UEC slate against 2-time defending champion Larkin on Dec. 1.

Glenbard South

Coach: Wade Hardtke (17th season).

Last season's record: 12-16, 9-8.

Top returning players: Jalen Brown, sr. (F, 6-3); Dmanuel Payton, sr. (G, 5-8); Harper Bryan, jr. (F, 6-4); Owen Gibson, sr. (F, 6-4); Alex Lamontagna, sr. (G, 6-0).

Top new players: Cam Williams, jr. (F, 6-3); Angjelos Salca, jr. (G, 6-0); Mitch Erickson, soph. (G, 6-0).

Worth noting: Brown's name should ring familiar to Raiders' football fans after he ran for a school-record 286 yards on 21 carries with 4 touchdowns against **Bartlett** this past fall. On the basketball court, Brown averaged a double-double with 13 points and 13 rebounds per game last season. Payton, Bryan, Gibson and Lamontagna combined to provide 17 points per contest a year ago. Williams, another football standout committed to Notre Dame in 2024, heads a contingent of varsity newcomers. "We have a lot of athleticism this season," said Hardtke. "We will need to establish our identity and style early on in the season." Glenbard South begins its season against Glenbard West in the District 87 Thanksgiving Tournament. The Raiders open UEC play against West Chicago on Dec. 7. "There are a lot of new coaches in the conference so it will be interesting to see how the style of play changes."

Larkin

Coach: Deryn Carter (14th year).

Last season's record: 31-4, 18-0.

Top returning players: Jakob "Cheese" Blakley, jr. (G, 6-0); Darnell Wilder, sr. (G, 5-10); Adrian Colen-York, sr. (G, 6-3); Armani Ivy, sr. (F, 6-2).

Top new players: Jackson Casebeer, jr. (F, 6-4); Tremare Reed, jr. (G, 5-9); AJ Jones, soph. (G, 5-9); Josh Hibbett, soph. (G, 5-10).

Worth noting: It will be tough to top last year's list of accomplishments, as the **Royals** won the most games in school history (31-4), cruised through the Upstate Eight with an unblemished 18-0 mark, and captured regional and sectional titles before being knocked off by eventual 4A state champion Glenbard West in the tournament. **Larkin** graduated several standouts from a year ago, including Fox All-Area Captain Damari Wheeler-Thomas (now at North Dakota State) and Fernando Perez, Jr. "We lost a lot of production from last year -- lost a lot of leadership and playmaking," said **Larkin coach Deryn Carter**. "We are not going to be the same type of team, but we will have some of the same qualities that we have always had." The **Royals'** top returnee, Jakob "Cheese" Blakley (13 ppg), will be sidelined for the first couple months due to an injury. "Jakob is recovering from surgery in the summer," said Carter. "We will have to figure some things out while he is not playing. Once he gets back, we have a chance to be one of the best teams in the area." Wilder, Colen-York and Ivy will be leaned upon in Blakley's absence, while newcomers Casebeer, Reed, Jones and Hibbett hope to provide a spark. The **Royals** open their season Monday at the Rockford Tip-Off Classic and begin conference play at Glenbard East on Dec. 1. Their home debut is Dec. 6 against **South Elgin**. "I am excited to see how good we can be when it comes playoff time," said Carter.

South Elgin

Coach: Philip Church (1st season).

Last season's record: 17-14, 12-5.

Top returning players: Elias Cole Williams, sr. (G/F, 6-1); Victor Sison, sr. (G/F, 6-2); Mason Montgomery, sr. (G/F, 6-1); Sean Harvey, sr. (F, 6-7); Jake Tiakhiao, sr. (G, 5-11).

Top new players: Shailen Shukti, soph. (G, 5-9); Caiden Scholl, soph. (F, 6-2); Derek Clark, jr. (F, 6-3); Luis Vergara, jr. (G, 5-10); Ethan Zagore, jr. (F, 6-1); Nathan Dinse, sr. (F, 6-2).

Worth noting: One of three first-year head coaches in the Upstate Eight, Philip Church previously served as a longtime varsity assistant at **Bartlett**, so he is totally familiar with the conference. "Everyone is still chasing **Larkin** and **Bartlett**," said Church. "With so many new coaches in the conference, it will be interesting to see how teams shape up come February." **South Elgin** lost a lot of experienced talent to graduation, leaving Church with a bit of an unknown commodity this season. "We have very little varsity experience coming back," said the coach. "Only Elias (Williams) played in last year's senior-dominated lineup so getting guys caught up to speed on how to compete at the varsity level has been a focus since June. I like the talent we have but know that our brutal non-conference schedule (Willowbrook, Benet, St. Charles North, Fremd, Burlington Central) will push the physical and mental growth for everyone." Church has high hopes for his young squad. "We've got a solid sophomore team coming up and are expecting to start competing for postseason titles this year. I think that Glenbard South, East Aurora and Fenton will shock some people. The conference unloaded a lot of talent but there are still players in the conference who are going to keep the Upstate Eight on the map." **South Elgin** opens its season Tuesday against Willowbrook at the St. Charles East/Ron Johnson Thanksgiving Tournament and begins UEC play against Glenbard South on Dec. 1.

Streamwood

Coach: Quentin Ruff (1st season)

Last season's record: 5-27, 3-15.

Top returning players: Dakota White, sr. (G, 6-1); Jack Jeschke, sr. (F, 6-0); James Donato, jr. (F, 6-3).

Top new players: Terrell Young, soph. (G, 5-10); Isiah Shafi, jr. (F, 6-1); Francis Sagadraca, jr. (G, 5-10); Genaud Phillips, jr. (G, 5-11); Anjelo Agdagdag, jr. (G, 5-11); Tre'Sean Bush, jr. (G,

5-11); Sincir Hunter, jr. (G, 6-0); Josh Wilder, sr. (G, 5-11); Saul Zamudio, sr. (G, 5-10); James Rivera, sr. (F, 6-4); Manuel Nieto, sr. (F, 6-3); Diego Alcantar, sr. (G, 5-10).

Worth noting: The **Sabres** have a new coach, as Quentin Ruff takes over for Kent Payne, who guided the team the past 4 seasons. "This is my first year taking over the program and we have to build some great team chemistry," said Ruff, who brings some lofty goals into his debut campaign. "My goal is to win 15 games this year. This is a big jump, but I think if my guys buy in and lock into the system, we can make it a competitive year. White, called "the hardest worker in the program" by Ruff, averaged 9 points and 11 rebounds per game last season. Ruff's recent coaching experience includes stops at **Elgin** (2 years as JV), UW-Stout (1 year as an assistant), Lewis University (1 year as an assistant), and **Larkin** (1 year as freshman head coach). **Streamwood** opens its season Monday against Johnsburg at the Johnsburg Thanksgiving Tournament and begins UEC play against East Aurora on Dec. 1. "I think the conference is up for grabs," said Ruff. "Some big-time names have graduated. Some teams are returning a lot of guys so the league will be very competitive -- like it always is."

West Chicago

Coach: Bill Recchia (11th season).

Last season's record: 4-19, 2-15.

Top returning players: Ayden Russo, sr. (G, 5-9); Jack Schultz, sr. (G, 6-0); Caleb Williams, sr. (F, 6-5); Mason Williams, jr. (F, 6-3).

Top new players: Joe Trigueros, soph. (F, 6-2); Brayden Alderton, soph. (F, 6-0).

Worth noting: Improvement is the key word surrounding this year's Wildcats' team. "We're looking to continue the improvements made during the second half of last season," said West Chicago coach Bill Recchia. Four players -- Russo (9.3 ppg, 1.3 assists per game), Schultz, Caleb Williams, and Mason Williams return with significant varsity minutes under their belts last year, while four others -- Trigueros, Alderton, Robert Lee and Tommy Doyle are first-time varsity performers. Recchia expects the seniors to provide leadership and his team to play hard

from start to finish. The Wildcats open their season Tuesday against Lisle at the Lisle Thanksgiving Tournament and begin UEC play on Dec. 1 against **Bartlett**.

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Girls basketball: Preseason Top 20

Nov. 18, 2022

Girls basketball

Team Comment

1. Benet (30-5) Indiana-recruit Beaumont leads the way
2. Stevenson (36-2) Defending 4A state champs have 4 of top 6 back
3. Barrington (30-6) Swanson, O'Riordan quite a 1-2 punch
4. Carmel (28-7) Wood returns for defending Class 3A champs
5. Hersey (27-6) Michigan-bound Eidle leads talented Huskies
6. Fremd (27-7) Vikings have an experienced core
7. Libertyville (23-11) Maryland recruit Fisher Wildcats' go-to player
8. Geneva (25-5) Vikings experienced, talented
9. Naperville N. (30-4) 30-0 in DVC in Colletti's 3 years as coach
10. Montini (25-9) Deep and talented roster
11. Prospect (22-8) Twelve multi-sport athletes on the roster

12. Lake Zurich (20-12) Another elite team in NSC with key players back

13. Huntley (23-7) Four starters return for defending FVC champs

14. Rolling Meadows (16-14) Plenty of potential for Mustangs

15. York (17-13) Four starters return

16. Downers North (24-8) Hard-nosed defensive squad

17. Glenbard W. (18-13) Five straight winning seasons

18. Willowbrook (22-6) Lost a lot of talent but still high hopes

19. South Elgin (27-6) Set school record for wins last year

20. Maine South (23-9) Two straight CSL championships

Others to watch: Round Lake 28-4, Batavia 19-15, Burlington Central 23-10, Neuqua Valley

15-13